

Practitioner Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation: Rapport Building with Young People

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This study was funded by the BASPCAN, Jacobs Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation. We sincerely thank the practitioners whose time, passion, openness and professional experiences made this study possible. We also extend special thanks to Maisie Ahern, Rhianna Ilube, Charlotte Leach and Eleanor Prince for their valuable assistance with data preparation.

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Abstract

Young people suspected of being sexually exploited are unlikely to have made prior disclosures before being approached by authorities and this can make them especially uncomfortable when involved in investigations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with front-line social workers and law enforcement practitioners about their experiences interacting with youth during Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) investigations. The findings provided some tentative insights into the processes by which practitioners sought to establish rapport with young people who have been exploited and establish themselves as trustworthy abuse disclosure recipients. Practitioners reported that rapport building in CSE cases not only occurred over lengthy periods of time (e.g., months or years) but also required repeated contacts between the practitioners and young people; during which practitioners minimized their roles as authorities and maximized their authenticity as caring people. Practitioners mentioned the importance of dependability, light heartedness, and having a casual demeanor. Findings have implications for managing reluctance and understanding rapport building when working with possible victims.

Keywords: child sexual exploitation, rapport building, qualitative

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Despite the fact that Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)¹ is recognized as a serious problem (Barnardo's, 2015), there is limited systematic research on young people who have been exploited. Little is known about how to effectively interact with young people who have been exploited in order to facilitate their willingness to report such crimes. This is concerning since disclosure critically affects the legal outcomes of investigations (Sutorius & Kaldal, 2003) and youths' access to therapeutic resources. Understanding reluctance exhibited by youth who have been exploited, and the ways professionals seek to address it, may also shed light on methods to manage children's unwillingness to disclose other forms of maltreatment. The purpose of the present study was to examine social workers' and police officers' perspectives on the development of rapport with young people who have been exploited.

Many young people who have been exploited are unwilling to cooperate with the authorities (Lindholm et al., 2014; Pollock & Hollier, 2010) for a host of reasons, including fear of reprisals, loyalty to offenders, and because they do not perceive themselves as victims (Srikantiah, 2007). Young people who have been exploited may also refrain from disclosures because they are resigned to sexual violence, fear of being judged by others, and doubt the ability of investigators to protect them (Beckett et al., 2013). Young people may also feel resistant to disclose to authorities because they perceive the police and social services

¹ For the present study, CSE was defined as the sexual exploitation of minors when the young persons receive "something" (e.g., money, affection) in exchange for sexual activity.

Offenders exploiting minors have power over them due to their status (e.g., age, intellect, finances) and frequently use violence, coercion and/or intimidation to maintain control (Department for Children Schools and Families [DCSF], 2009).

negatively and/or have had negative experiences with them (Smeaton, 2013). Threats from offenders may also lead young people who have been exploited to deceive law enforcement agents (Moossy, 2009).

Children are largely reluctant to disclose abuse, especially when no prior disclosure has been made (Rush, Lyon, Ahern, & Quas, 2014; Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Katz, 2014). Recent research has highlighted that children's willingness to disclose maltreatment may depend on how suspicions arose (Rush, Lyon, Ahern, & Quas, 2014), especially the extent to which the child's verbal report of abuse, rather than another source of information, triggered the investigation. A study examining forensic interviews of 4- to 13- year olds whose abuse had been corroborated independently revealed that children who previously disclosed were more likely to report abuse to youth investigators in forensic interviews than children who had not previously disclosed (Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Katz, 2014). These findings speak to the difficult dynamics of disclosure by young people who have been exploited because they are often brought to authorities' attention by other witnesses (e.g., Smeaton, 2013) or police surveillance rather than by their own disclosures, and this may affect their willingness to cooperate with investigative teams. Young people who have not yet demonstrated their willingness to report prior to the investigation may not feel emotionally prepared to disclose. Thus, it is vital to learn how to adequately secure their trust and facilitate their comfort.

A review of the UK Operation Bullfinch observed that the young people involved in the CSE investigation cared greatly about practitioners' authenticity and expressions of genuine care (Bedford, 2015). Other survey research shows that American adolescents disclosing sexual assaults to law enforcement officers appreciated practitioners who were personable and reassuring to them (Greeson, Campbell, & Fehler-Cabral, 2014). These findings accord with those obtained in studies showing how important it is for professionals interacting with youth at-risk for CSE to engage with them in friendly, dependable, and

flexible ways (Gilligan, 2016) that make them feel cared for and heard (Smeaton, 2013). Similarly, adults who disclosed sexual assault valued practitioners who acknowledged their emotions, talked about unthreatening topics before discussing the incident, and allowed them time before expecting them to answer questions (Patterson, 2011).

Laboratory and field studies show the importance of rapport building and emotional support when interviewing suspected victims who are not cooperative (Goodman & Bottoms, 1993; Hynan, 1999; Ruddock, 2006) because they increase children's engagement and feelings of empowerment while decreasing anxiety and distress (e.g., Siegman & Reynolds, 1983; Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, & Horowitz, 2006). Research on investigative interviewing also suggests that professionals working with young people who have been exploited should encourage them to share personally meaningful information unrelated to the incident (Hershkowitz, 2009; Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 2004; Sternberg et al., 1997) and show personal interest in the interviewees, asking about their feelings, and offering kind gestures and appreciation (Hershkowitz, 2011). Rapport building enriched with empathic comments increases children's willingness to disclose maltreatment (Hershkowitz, 2011) and their responsiveness to prompts in forensic interviews (Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Blasbalg, & Winstanley, 2015).

Finally, cornerstones of rapport, such as expressions of genuine concern, warmth, and empathy can affect others' well-being (Farber, 2003). Children who are believed and supported by caregivers are also more likely to maintain their allegations over time (Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007) and to have more positive psychological outcomes (Goodman et al., 1992; Gries, Goh, Andrews, Gilbert, & Praver, 2000; Palo & Gilbert, 2015), which illustrates the importance of youth being supported by key adult figures in their lives. In the case of young people who have been exploited and whose home lives may have been tumultuous

(Barnardo's, 2014), this may make it even more important for the professionals involved to be supportive to these youth.

To date, no researchers have systematically examined practitioners' perspectives on rapport building in interactions with young people who have been exploited but have not made disclosures. Although law enforcement, social-care, and researchers recognize that CSE is a serious concern (Barnardo's, 2014) and while young people who have been exploited are often reluctant to engage with service agencies (Moosy, 2009), there is limited research on ways in which practitioners might maximize rapport with these individuals. Accordingly, the present research explored practitioners' perspectives on means to establish rapport when working with this vulnerable population. The results can contribute to knowledge about the development of rapport building strategies targeting children who have not yet disclosed as well as older children and adolescents, and may also elucidate the complicated dynamics associated with CSE (e.g., victims protecting offenders, perhaps feeling that they were not victimized but were willing participants).

Method

Sample

Approximately 30 law enforcement officers and 10 social workers who worked directly with young people involved in CSE investigations were approached via email by their supervisors; 15 CSE practitioners consented to be involved in the research (10 law enforcement personnel, 5 social workers) and participated in semi-structured interviews by one of three interviewers. The word "practitioner" is used below as an umbrella term referring to a law enforcement officer or social worker. Interviewers had graduate level psychology degrees and experience directly working on child maltreatment cases as forensic interviewers and/or therapists. Participants had worked in social care or law enforcement for

between 4 and 30 years and had focused on CSE cases for between 0.5 and 3.75 years.

Practitioners participating in the study were recruited from a single United Kingdom Constabulary and Local Authority.

Semi-Structured Interview

Interviews were conducted individually, audio recorded, lasted 1 to 1.5 hours, and were transcribed. Interviewers met throughout the course of data collection to discuss emerging themes, possible modifications to interview structure, and to monitor quality. All interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants. One interview was conducted via telephone, and because its length was comparable to that of the others, it was included. The authors received Institutional Review Board approval and established an official partnership with a local Constabulary and City Council to conduct the research. Participants were assured of confidentiality by the researchers as well as by their employers.

The semi-structured interviews focused on rapport building (“How did you first approach [young person]?”), practitioner well-being, practitioners’ experiences going to court, thoughts about the young persons’ eventual disclosures, and the Rotherham case (which was in the news at the time of the interviews) (Jay, 2013). The present paper focuses on the findings related to practitioners’ perspectives on rapport building.

Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that interviewers asked participants to elaborate on apparent references to common themes, and references that appeared unique or needed clarification. Expansions were requested using open-ended questions (e.g., “Tell me more about what you mean by that.”; see Ahern, Sadler, Gariglietti, & Lamb (*in press*) for the interview script).

As part of a larger study, semi-structured interviews with young people who had been exploited were also conducted. These interviews focused on the young persons’ reports about

the investigative process, their feelings throughout the investigation, and factors that affected their comfort. The present manuscript however focuses solely on the practitioner interviews.

Coding

Informal discussions between authors took place periodically following interviewing and transcribing sessions, highlighting possible key concepts addressed in the interviews and effecting minor changes to the semi-structured interview script.

An initial list of potential themes was generated and refined through discussions among the interviewers after they had independently reviewed transcripts, with new themes being added in order to ensure that the list of themes was exhaustive.

A thematic analysis approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved a systematic process of identifying patterns of meaning in respondent accounts. The analysis comprised several steps: (1) familiarization with the data by reading each transcript repeatedly, (2) generating initial labels to capture the ideas expressed, (3) clustering labels representing similar ideas to produce a tentative list of themes for each interview, (4) comparing themes across interviews to create a “thematic map” of the data, and (5) defining and refining themes to produce a consolidated set of themes which were grouped into broad domains to provide an organizing structure. Attention was paid to ensuring that each theme was illustrated using exemplary extracts from the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In accordance with good practice guidelines for qualitative research (Barker & Pistrang, 2005), “credibility checks” were undertaken. The first author took the lead in the analysis; the second author read a subset of the transcripts and audited the first author’s documentation of the analytic process. This consensus approach was used to avoid relying on a single researcher’s interpretation of the data: the research team discussed different ways of conceptualizing and representing the data, and modifications were made before reaching agreement on the final set of themes.

Results

Many practitioners mentioned that, for CSE cases, there is no concrete guidance on rapport building. Thus, the practitioners reported what they personally found helpful from their own first-hand experiences working with young people suspected of being exploited. Four broad domains were identified for rapport building: spending a substantial amount of time with suspected victims, minimizing their role as authorities, positive personal attributes of practitioners, and being empathic.

Time intensive. Practitioners universally reported that a significant amount of time is necessary to successfully build rapport with young people involved in CSE investigations. Resisting the urge to pressure the young persons for disclosure and allowing them to “set the pace,” so disclosure occurred when the young person was emotionally prepared to do so, was frequently reported. Practitioners worried that, if they applied pressure, young people might falsely deny charges because they were not emotionally ready to make truthful reports.

Not only did rapport building occur over lengthy periods of time (e.g., months or years), it required consistent and repeated contact between practitioners and the young people. Practitioners reported that repeated visits were needed because young people required extra time to overcome pre-existing negative perceptions of authority figures and come to trust them. Additionally, practitioners stated that extra time was necessary because the young people often did not recognize their own victimization at the beginning of the investigation. To address these needs, workers reported being patient and accommodating the young persons’ schedules and preferences, and thus, for example, responding to calls from young people outside of office hours in order to accommodate the young peoples’ needs.

The multiple visits workers reported with young people often did not focus on the investigation, especially during the first several encounters. Although workers informed young people about their job and purpose for approaching them (e.g., concerns over their

involvement with suspects), they deliberately avoided discussing the incidents leading to the investigation at that time. Because of the extended and frequent interactions, trust was often secured in due course following which details about the suspected events gradually emerged.

Many practitioners indicated that the protracted amount of time spent rapport building was in direct contrast to what happened in other child sexual abuse cases (which often involved a child making a disclosure to someone before law enforcement involvement) which were expeditiously closed when disclosures were not obtained early in the investigative process. Moreover, practitioners reported that they were offered little official guidance about how to build rapport with young people who had been exploited.

Minimizing the authority role. Many practitioners described the importance of minimizing their role as authority figures when interacting with young people. In order to mitigate possible negative perceptions of police or social care, many practitioners tried to present themselves as friendly, approachable and genuinely caring for the young persons' needs and safety. To downplay their role as authorities and represent themselves as genuinely caring, practitioners reported discussing non-investigative topics that were of interest to the young people, such as their hobbies, favorite music groups, and fashion. Several practitioners reported that they used social media platforms to research the young persons' interests prior to meeting them.

Efforts to empower young people were reflected most often by allowing them to choose where and when to meet. Meetings were flexible, and included outings to fast food restaurants, coffee houses, or parks. The key in deciding on locations, according to practitioners, was the young person's level of comfort ("We'll find a suitable environment, location so if they're not comfortable at home, then I don't go home. If they're not comfortable at school, I won't go there. [5]").

Others mentioned dressing casually (“If you need to wear your jeans, wear your jeans. Wear things that the girls are going to relate to and not see you as an authoritarian figure. [7]”), and having casual demeanor (“Keep it light hearted, have a joke with them... you’ve got to be able to talk to people, engaging with them, but interested in them and relaxed. If you’re fairly stiff and standoffish and not comfortable talking to young people, they’re not going to talk to you. [5]”).

Several practitioners also reported that helping young people with issues outside of the investigation scope (e.g., school problems) was important to show genuine care (“It’s all about how you getting on, how’s school been, got any problems, how you been getting on with social worker? [4]”, “If you’re willing to listen about what happened at school the other day, that really upset them but seems trivial to parents or to us. If you can listen to that for an hour or two, again it makes them feel valued and respected and that’s the first step to actually going any further and getting them to speak. [6]”).

Practitioner personal attributes. During the semi structured interviews, practitioners were asked to highlight qualities in practitioners they thought were especially helpful to facilitate rapport building. Many workers reported the importance of having a nonjudgmental stance.

Others reported that simply enjoying teenagers and having the natural ability to communicate effectively with them was critical. Moreover, dependability and patience were also highlighted by practitioners.

Practitioner 11:

Not giving up on them, to just, however many times they’re rude to us, they show that they can be relied on, they don’t miss appointments. If they make an appointment to see a young person, they always turn up, be really strong on that so that we can show that we’re not gonna let them down. It’s just that, really, being reliable.

A supervisor offered an example of a colleague’s demeanor (Practitioner 8):

It was a particular social worker who is very warm and laid back. In fact when I first started to manage her I thought she was probably a bit too laid back, but she is very openly warm and friendly and steady. She just gave the impression that she was steady. You know she would walk across the room and others would be running and she be just kinda of poking along. She had this air of being steady as well..

Having confidence in oneself and the ability to self-assert were reportedly critical, especially according to the social workers interviewed, allowing them to manage cases effectively and to advocate for young peoples' needs.

Practitioner 13:

You've got to be able to manage the practitioners, and that can be quite a challenge itself, the victim, the family, and there may be times as well where you've got to manage the perpetrator...very quickly over a short space of time.

Practitioner 2:

You've got to be able to stamp your feet a bit, especially [when there is] sometimes a higher management decisions that you don't agree with, you've got to be a confident personality to be able to actually know this is 100% what I believe and what I need to fight for this young person. And the problem with CSE is that you are sometimes battling quite hard with the police because they have this criminal investigation that needs to run on and sometimes as a social worker you know things have got to slow down.

Empathy. Finally, practitioners often mentioned the importance of empathy. To some extent, practitioners would offer broad references to empathy for rapport building; "you have to be empathic." Most often, however, empathy was in the form of expressing compassion for the young persons and understanding their vulnerable life histories. Practitioners offered many

examples of the young persons' perspectives of the investigation and their attempts to accommodate their needs.

Practitioner 11:

I could see why she ended up with this man, I had so much information about her own parents, abuse she'd seen, their own mental health, that you could see that she's so lost and she's so desperate, and that anger, that's all it is. She wants, she's seeking stuff from unhealthy places, but that's because she's missing something; I guess it was moments in the middle, where she was so angry and rude and difficult, that you kind of, it was hard to kind of, you know, you want to go straight in and say "J-, seriously, come on" but she's got to learn in her own time. She's got enough people saying to her "this has happened, you're a victim, come on".

Some practitioners also mentioned reassurances they would give to young people, such as letting them know they were not the only ones involved in the investigation;

Discussion

The findings of this study provide some tentative insights into the processes by which practitioners who had experience conducting CSE investigations strived to achieve rapport with young people who had been exploited and establish themselves as trustworthy sources to whom the young people could disclose abuse. Practitioners reported that rapport building with young people who had been exploited in CSE cases not only occurred over lengthy periods of time (e.g., months or years) but also required repeated contacts between the practitioners and young people during which practitioners minimized their roles as authorities and maximized their authenticity as caring people. The extensive amount of time required for rapport building in the form of repeated visits over prolonged periods of time raises several issues.

Although practitioners appeared very aware that many alleged child abuse victims do not disclose when formally interviewed (Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005), they agreed that, for young people who have been exploited, extensive contact was absolutely critical. This may be because many victims of child sexual abuse have usually made a prior disclosure before meeting with law enforcement or social workers, perhaps demonstrating an initial willingness to report whereas many suspected victims of exploitation were approached before they had disclosed to friends, family members, or the authorities. The practitioners engaged in lengthy rapport building processes that involved repeatedly meeting with youth over time in order to foster their comfort and trust. Thus, in contrast to child interviewing guidelines that focus on building rapport within a single forensic interview (Lamb et al., 2008), practitioners described extended efforts to manage reluctance prior to undertaking forensic interviews.

The rapport building described by practitioners might be criticized in court as coercive because it involved repeated contacts. Several practitioners reported the need to resist the urge to ask for disclosures before the young people were “ready”. Although the practitioners described non-suggestive methods of developing rapport (e.g., talking about neutral topics), it is important to document rapport-building encounters, even when no criminal content is discussed. Moreover, verbatim or video recordings of every encounter with suspected victims may not only preserve the verbatim exchanges between young people and practitioners for court purposes, but could also offer a medium through which supervision could be provided.

The months of effort considered necessary to establish rapport is likely hugely taxing on agency resources and may not be fiscally feasible when there are hundreds of suspected non-disclosing youth who have been exploited. Empirically validating extended rapport

building is needed to not only justify the logistical costs of prolonged engagement, but to also identify the most efficacious means of working with victims over lengthy periods of time.

It might also be important to develop targeted ways to promote rapport more rapidly. Investigators may first focus on cooperative witnesses, with more reluctant witnesses being approached in light of new information later in the investigation. Unfortunately, there has been no experimental research on how to engage with suspected victims of abuse or exploitation who have not yet reported, especially on how to elicit reliable disclosures.

Many practitioners reported that it was important to avoid identification as authority figures by discussing neutral topics, allowing young people to choose where and when to meet, and dressing casually, echoing findings obtained in other research (e.g., Smeaton, 2013). Such methods appear to be youth-focused and highlight the need for service agencies to promote this type of flexibility on the part of staff members. The fact that many social workers emphasized the need to self-assert may reflect obstacles they have to overcome in order to address the young persons' well-being rather than the legal prosecution.

The personal attributes practitioners mentioned (e.g., being non-judgmental, light hearted) appear to be qualities that might mitigate the impact of negative past experiences with law enforcement personnel, social workers, and familiar adults in their lives (e.g., family members, teachers). These qualities might also help protect practitioners from the emotional costs that CSE cases might entail for them (Ahern et al., *in press*). In order to preserve these positive qualities in practitioners, it may be critical for practitioner well-being to be emphasized by their agencies.

The findings reported here reveal a need to develop a best practice policy for interviewing young persons who have been exploited. Practitioners mentioned rapport building methods that were very youth-centered and time consuming. They also highlighted practitioner attributes they thought were helpful to promote the comfort of young persons.

The fact that practitioners reported interviewing suspected CSE witnesses in a variety of ways, sometimes using methods that could be criticized in court and that have not been empirically tested, highlight a potentially inadequate approach to CSE witnesses at the agency level. Variations in rapport building practices can decrease the alleged victims' opportunities (legal rights) to have their cases taken to court. The findings also indicate that research-based guidelines are needed in order to prevent the use of time consuming self-invented interview techniques if more efficient strategies are available. Future research should examine and test various strategies, including those mentioned by practitioners, in order to inform case management guidelines.

Limitations

Although practitioners appeared to report their experiences candidly, it is impossible to remove the influence of the researcher and participant characteristics (e.g., social desirability) on the data collected (Evans et al., 2013). In order to address limitations of retrospective recall of complex social interactions and bias (Pistrang & Barker, 2005) observational methods, such as documentations of actual interactions, should be employed. The disproportionate number of female officers and the use of a snowballing approach (exploiting associations between participants) may have influenced the opinions expressed as well. The results presented were qualitative in nature and should not be generalized to other populations; rather there is a need to access and examine more diverse samples in depth. Finally, a quantitative and experimental approach, in which different types of rapport building methods were compared would help elucidate the relative effectiveness of various rapport building methods.

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